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U.S. Stance on India Baffled Diplomats

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In mid-April last year a "secret" cable from New Delhi dropped into the incoming traffic of Secretary of State William P. Rogers. "Pakistan is probably finished as a unified state," said the message from U.S. Ambassador Kenneth B. Keating. "India is clearly the predominant actual and potential power in this area of the world. Bangladesh, with limited potential and massive problems, is probably emerging as an independent country."

"There is much the United States can do . . ." The classified cable was the first attempt by the U.S. embassy in New Delhi to set out in comprehensive terms a policy for meeting the oncoming holocaust in the subcontinent.

Its substance was to be repeated at least a dozen times, in varying form, as the pattern of armed confrontation between India and Pakistan hardened into a full-scale military conflict.

But, as events unfolded, the Washington view of how to deal with the threat of war on the subcontinent began to diverge ever more sharply from the course that was being propounded by the U.S. officials "on the ground" in India and East Bengal.

Initial puzzlement at the responses of Washington gave way, among the diplomats in the field, to incredulity and privately expressed anger at America's increasingly isolated position on the subcontinent, except in West Pakistan.

The only top-ranking American diplomat in the region who seemed to be in phase with the Nixon administration's evolving policy of partiality to Pakistan was Ambassador Joseph S. Farland, who heads the U.S. embassy in the West Pakistani capital of Islamabad.

The cardinal points of disagreement between Washington and the officials in

the field were anticipated in the first Keating cable last April. One was the question of whether the United States should forcefully tell Pakistani President Yahya Khan to end the policy of military repression against the Bengali majority in East Pakistan, as well as to insist upon the release of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman, the pre-eminent political leader of the Bengali state.

Keating advised Rogers that the United States should "encourage the GOP (Government of Pakistan) to change its policy of military repression . . ." as well as to make a clear statement of "displeasure at the use of American arms and material" in East Bengal.

Keating also proposed that the United States voice its concern to Yahya over the fate of the sheikh, who was imprisoned in West Pakistan after having been arrested March 25 at his home in Dacca.

Only three months earlier the sheikh and his Awami League had won 167 of the 169 seats allotted to East Bengal in the Pakistan National Assembly.

In addition the U.S. ambassador said an American expression of hope for an early political settlement in East Bengal would, "if coupled with termination of American military supplies and suspension of economic assistance, have a sobering effect" on Yahya's government.

"Moreover," the Keating cable said, "such a course of U.S. action would be consistent with the realities of Pakistan's deterioration, India's predominance and of Bangladesh's emergence . . ."

The secret message went on to say it was of questionable value to American interests to "continue to refer in official communication and public statements to events in East Pakistan as

affair" in this context has become a code phrase in India and Pakistan for acquiescence in the military repressions.

"In short," Keating concluded, "the United States has interests in India, West Pakistan and Bangladesh which probably cannot be equally well served."

"Where the necessity for choice arises, we should be guided by the new power realities in South Asia, which fortunately, in the present case, largely parallel the moral realities as well."

The military repression to which Keating referred was the systematic slaughter, starting on the night of March 25, of Bengali civilians by the Pakistani army and its local paramilitary forces in the former Province of East Pakistan.

Just how many Bengalis were slaughtered in the ensuing eight months is subject to a wider range of conjecture. "I would not seriously consider any estimate of less than 250,000," said an American official who served in Dacca during the reign of terror.

Most Western estimates are in the range of 300,000 to 500,000. The Bangladesh government puts the toll of victims at closer to 2 million. There is no ready way to count because of the absence of accurate census figures or burial markers and the speed of decomposition in the warm, loamy and bone-scattered soil of East Bengal.

But American eyewitnesses and other western newsmen who were whisked out of Dacca at the beginning of the terror spoke of thousands of killings in the first week after Pakistani troops surged out of their garrisons. They reported the continuous clatter of machine-gun and small-arms fire and the sight of flames rising throughout the city as student buildings, Hindu districts and residential strongholds of the sheikh's Awami League organization were razed and their inhabitants incinerated or machine-gunned.

The civilian slaughters became another point of contention between the administration in Washington and the American officials who

Archer K. Blood, former U.S. consul-general in Dacca, cabled detailed reports on the killings to the embassy in Pakistan. But government sources in Washington said the reports on the magnitude of the killing were disbelieved at the time in Washington. The dispatches, it was said here, were considered "alarmist."

A petition was circulated at the Dacca consulate by Blood's subordinates. It took issue with the administration's policy of silence at the civilian massacres in East Bengal. As chief of the consulate Blood declined to sign the document, but passed it on to Islamabad and Washington with appropriate classification.

On June 5, Blood returned to the United States. Although he had been scheduled for another 18-month tour in Pakistan after home leave, he never returned to his post. He was assigned to the personnel department at the State Department in Washington.

The administration chose not to make an issue of the repressive tactics employed against the Bengalis, and particularly Awami League supporters, on grounds that the United States would have lost diplomatic leverage with Yahya's government. At the time, the Nixon administration said it was pursuing a course of "quiet diplomacy" to avert war.

But it has been acidly observed by U.S. officials in the field that "quiet diplomacy" was widely construed in India and Bangladesh to mean American acquiescence in one of the bloodiest repressions in recent times of a largely unarmed civilian population by a modern army using American weapons.

Some 10 million Bengalis, about 13 per cent of East Bengal's population, fled across the borders into the surrounding states of India, already among the most overpopulated and destitute areas of the world.

From the standpoint of the American diplomat in the field, the administration's assertion of a quiet and even-handed style of diplomacy in the subcontinent strained credulity with the dispatch of the U.S. Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal in the midst of the war.

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